



French riot police face off with protestors during a nationwide protest day against the government's economic and social reforms in Nantes yesterday. Inset, A protestor hurls a flare towards law enforcement officials (not in the picture).

PHOTO: AFP, REUTERS



Fall from Grace

Mugabe's wife was his weakness

AFP, Harare

President Robert Mugabe's downfall was caused by the ambitions of his combative wife Grace, whose emergence as his likely successor proved a step too far for Zimbabwe's military, analysts say.

Grace Mugabe -- 41 years younger than her husband -- was once dismissed as a lightweight shopping addict.

But she became increasingly active in public life in recent years, and became the frontrunner to take the top job when Mugabe last week sacked her arch-rival, vice president Emmerson Mnangagwa.

The military -- determined to stop Grace, 52, being named as the new vice president -- moved in on Wednesday, taking control of the country and signalling the imminent end of Mugabe's rule.

"The crisis has been triggered by Grace because she wanted to grab power and to have Mugabe remove a lot of people, Shadrack Cutto, director of the Centre for African Renaissance Studies at the University of South Africa, told AFP.

"She overreached herself. She has done a lot to accelerate the removal of her husband from power. The military decided that enough is enough."

Grace's political plans were backed by the so-called G40, a group of young supporters that has earned a reputation for aggression. The faction, which includes some ministers, has been the primary target of the military officers who announced on state TV in the early hours of Wednesday that they would bring "criminals" close to Mugabe to justice.

"The Zimbabwean army feel they have the right to have a president they approve of," Knox Chitiyo, of the Chatham House think-tank, told AFP.

"They had to act now before Grace was appointed as vice president at the ZANU-PF party congress next month. Grace's team got within weeks of success."



Grace, born in South Africa, was one of Mugabe's secretaries when their affair began in 1987, and they had two children in secret before the president's wife died in 1992.

The couple then married at a lavish ceremony in 1996 attended by Nelson Mandela, before having a third child.

Grace was awarded a doctorate by the University of Zimbabwe, where her husband is chancellor, reportedly just three months after enrolling, and in 2014 became the head of the ZANU-PF party's women's wing.

Dubbed "Gucci Grace", "The First Shopper" or even "Dis-Grace", she showed her political mettle in 2014 with her campaign against then-vice president Joice Mujuru, who was a contender to succeed her husband.

Grace launched sustained verbal attacks against Mujuru, accusing her of plotting to topple the president. Soon afterwards, Mujuru was ousted and later expelled from the ruling ZANU-PF party.

But Grace's attempt to neutralise Mnangagwa ended very differently -- leaving her and her husband languishing under house arrest in Harare.

With President Mugabe in increasingly poor health, Grace may now seek exile or try to secure some level of protection for her and her family as Zimbabwe enters a new era.



Time running out for German coalition talks

AFP, Berlin

Chancellor Angela Merkel warned that "serious differences" remain between the parties hoping to form Germany's next government but voiced hope a deal would emerge yesterday, hours before a deadline that could trigger snap polls.

We have "very different positions" on some policy issues, Merkel told reporters, adding, however, that "I believe it can work".

After weeks of quarrelsome exploratory talks, Merkel's CDU/CSU bloc, the pro-business Free Democrats (FDP) and the left-leaning Greens are holding a final day of talks before announcing if they have found enough common ground to begin formal coalition negotiations.

The awkward bedfellows, who differ on everything from refugees and climate protection to EU reforms, have been pushed together by September's inconclusive election, which left Merkel badly weakened as the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) lured millions of voters.

For Merkel, eyeing a fourth term, the stakes couldn't be higher.

"If the conservatives, the Greens and the FDP can't pull together, there's no way to avoid new elections," Der Spiegel news weekly wrote.

The potential tie-up, dubbed a "Jamaica coalition" because the parties' colours match those of the Jamaican flag, is untested at the national level and how stable such a government would be is anyone's guess.

Trump defends Asia trip

Boasts 'America is back', says Chinese envoy's trip to N Korea 'a big move'

AFP, Washington

US President Donald Trump hit back at critics of his recent Asia trip and vowed a global campaign of "maximum pressure" on North Korea, warning Pyongyang will not subject the world to "nuclear blackmail."

Defending an almost two week trip to Asia that was long on pomp but -- critics say -- short on achievements, Trump said he had successfully galvanized opposition to North Korean proliferation.

"I made clear that we will not allow this twisted dictatorship to hold the world hostage to nuclear blackmail," Trump said in a televised statement a day after returning from the marathon trip.

During a 25 minute address, Trump repeatedly reached for a bottle of water and appeared worn by the long journey that took in Hawaii, South Korea, Japan, China, Vietnam and the Philippines.

Always keen to garner praise and lift up examples of others showing him respect, Trump said the red carpet rolled out for him in Asia showed that "America is back."

"Everywhere we went, our foreign hosts greeted the American delegation and myself included with incredible warmth and hospitality and most importantly respect," he said.

Trump and his supporters are fighting a rearguard

action against suggestions that the trip was a failure.

They are pointing to a series of Asian investments in the United States and the release of three US basketball players on Chinese shoplifting charges, after presidential intervention, as evidence it was a success.

Adding to that, Trump himself said that he had won a commitment from Chinese leader Xi Jinping to use Beijing's economic leverage to denuclearize the Korean peninsula.

Singapore suspends trade ties with North Korea

Japan, US stage naval drill amid N Korea tension



It was not clear if that went beyond Chinese implementation of existing UN Security Council resolutions against Pyongyang.

Trump also suggested that Xi had ditched a proposal to freeze US military maneuvers in exchange for a freeze in North Korean proliferation.

Yesterday he praised China's decision to send a special envoy to its wayward ally North Korea.

"China is sending an Envoy and Delegation to North Korea - A big move, we'll see what hap-

pens!" he tweeted.

There was no immediate confirmation of what would be a significant shift in Chinese policy from Beijing's embassy in Washington.

Aside the furor over Trump tweets, his visit also saw 11 Asia-Pacific allies announce they would press ahead with a free trade agreement known as the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

Meanwhile, Singapore has suspended trade ties with North Korea in the latest move by a country to implement UN sanctions to curb Pyongyang's nuclear weapons programme, a customs document showed yesterday.

A circular by Singapore Customs on its website banned "all commercially traded goods... from or to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), regardless of whether they are imported, exported, transhipped or brought in transit through Singapore" with effect from November 8.

And Japan and the United States launched a joint naval drill yesterday in a show of force aimed at North Korea.

The 10-day exercise, joined by some 14,000 US servicemen, aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan and the guided-missile destroyers USS Stethem, USS Chafee and USS Mustin, among others, "will take place in waters surrounding Okinawa" in southern Japan, the US navy said in a statement.

'Fake news' becomes a business model

AFP, Washington

Cyber criminals have latched onto the notion of "fake news" and turned it into a profitable business model, with services starting at under \$10, security researchers said yesterday.

The online security firm Digital Shadows released a report highlighting services aimed at creating bogus media websites, fake reviews and social media "bots" or automated accounts to promote or denigrate commercial products and services.

One of the methods used is creating bogus or "spoofed" media websites designed to look like those of legitimate news organizations. The researchers uncovered some 2,800 "live spoof" sites.

This can be done by changing a single letter in a web address to create a fake "clone" of a legitimate news organization site.

Some criminals use the same methods as Russia-based propagandists -- modifying legitimate documents and leaking them as part of disinformation campaigns, the report said.

"Like any good news story, content will be shared, liked, reposted and distributed across many different platforms and channels," the report said.

"The more widely a piece of disinformation can be spread, the better the chances of it capturing the public imagination and achieving its objective -- whether that is to discredit an opponent, sow discord or to generate profit."



PHOTO: AFP

A man helps evacuate a woman from a flooded street in Mandra, northwest of Athens, yesterday. Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras declared a state of mourning after a freak overnight downpour with the force of a "waterfall" flooded three towns near Athens, killing at least 15 people.

UN CLIMATE TALKS IN BONN

Nations mull phasing out coal

US under fire for Trump's administration's defence of Earth-warming fossil fuels

AFP, Bonn

Twenty countries yesterday launched a coal phase-out initiative at UN climate talks in Bonn where America was under fire for the Donald Trump administration's defence of Earth-warming fossil fuels.

Led by Canada and Britain, the "Powering Past Coal Alliance" commits the nations, cities, and regions to weaning themselves off a commodity that still produces about 40 percent of the world's electricity -- a major contributor to global warming caused by greenhouse gas emissions.

The list includes Angola, Belgium, Finland, France, Italy, the Marshall Islands, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Portugal, and Mexico, as well as the regions of Ontario, Quebec, Washington and Alberta, and the city of Vancouver.

"This is another positive signal of the global momentum away from coal, benefiting the health of the climate, the public and the economy," said Jens Mattias Clausen of Greenpeace.



Beijing, Berlin and New Delhi, have also said they will phase out coal, but are not part of the alliance.

Later Thursday, an American official will address the penultimate day of the annual climate gathering.

With most countries represented by heads of

state or cabinet ministers at a "high-level segment" of the conference, Washington sent an acting assistant secretary of state, Judith Garber.

She will address delegates just three days after White House officials drew the ire of observers and delegates by hosting a sideline event defending the continued use of fossil fuels at a forum dedicated to the pursuit of greener alternatives.

Announcing Garber's participation, the State Department emphasised that the Trump administration's position on the climate-rescue Paris Agreement "remains unchanged", and it would withdraw "as soon as it is eligible to do so, unless the president can identify terms for engagement that are more favourable to American businesses, workers, and taxpayers."

The United States ratified the hard-fought global pact, championed by former president Barack Obama, just two months before Donald Trump, who has called climate change a "hoax", was elected to the White House.

Trump announced in June that America would abandon the pact, but the rules say this cannot happen until November 2020.

Israel ready to cooperate with Saudi to face Iran

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel's military chief of staff yesterday said in an interview that his country was prepared to cooperate with Saudi Arabia to face Iran's plans "to control the Middle East."

His comments were the latest sign that behind-the-scenes links between Israel and Gulf countries may be occurring due to Iran, their shared enemy, even though they do not have formal diplomatic ties.

"We are ready to exchange experience with the moderate Arab countries and exchange intelligence information to face Iran," Lieutenant General Gadi Eisenkot was quoted as saying by Elaph, a news website run by a Saudi businessman.

Asked whether any information had been shared recently with Saudi Arabia, he said "we are ready to share information if necessary. There are many common interests between us and them."

Israel's army confirmed the contents of the rare interview with Arabic-language media.

According to Israel's army, it was the first interview of its kind since 2005.

Sunni Muslim powerhouse Saudi Arabia has long been at loggerheads with Shia, non-Arab Iran but friction has spiralled recently.

Earlier this month, Lebanese prime minister Saad Hariri announced from Saudi capital Riyadh that he was quitting, citing Iran's "grip" on his country.

The leader of Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shia group supported by Iran, has accused Saudi Arabia of pressing Israel to launch attacks against it.

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani made similar allegations this week.

Eisenkot said in the interview that "we have no intention of initiating a conflict with Hezbollah in Lebanon and reaching a war, but we cannot accept strategic threats to Israel there."

"I am very happy with the calm on both sides of the border, which has lasted 11 years. On the other hand, we see Iranian attempts to escalate."

"With President Donald Trump, there is a chance for a new international alliance in the region and a major strategic plan to stop the Iranian threat," Eisenkot said.